

Abraham Lincoln papers

Abraham Lincoln, Proclamation [Copy Not in Lincoln's Hand]¹, February 4, 1862

¹ Nathaniel Gordon was the first and only person executed under a federal law that made participation in the international slave trade a capital offense. Before issuing this stay of execution, Lincoln had queried Attorney General Bates about his authority to grant a reprieve without relieving Gordon of his death penalty. Citing the Constitution, Bates assured Lincoln that he indeed had that power, whereupon Lincoln immediately exercised it. See Bates to Lincoln, February 4, 1862.

Abraham Lincoln,

President of the United States of America,

To all to whom these Presents shall come, Greeting:

Whereas, it appears that at a Term of the Circuit Court of the United States of America for the Southern District of New York, held in the month of November, A. D. 1861, Nathaniel Gordon was indicted and convicted for being engaged in the Slave Trade, and was by the said Court, sentenced to be put to death by hanging by the neck, on Friday the 7th day of February, A. D. 1862; —

And whereas, a large number of respectable citizens have earnestly besought me to commute the said sentence of the said Nathaniel Gordon, to a term of imprisonment for life, which application I have felt it to be my duty to refuse; —

And whereas, it has seemed to me probable that the unsuccessful application made for the commutation of his sentence, may have prevented the said Nathaniel Gordon from making the necessary preparations for the awful change which awaits him; —

Now therefore, be it known, that I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America, have granted, and do hereby grant unto him, the said Nathaniel Gordon, a respite of the above recited sentence, until Friday the twenty-first day of February, A. D. 1862, between the hours of twelve o'clock at noon and three o'clock in the afternoon of the said day, when the said sentence shall be executed.

In granting this respite, it becomes my painful duty to admonish the prisoner that, relinquishing all expectation of pardon by Human Authority, he refer himself alone to the mercy of the Common God and Father of all men.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto signed my name and caused the Seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this Fourth day of February, A. D. 1862, and of the Independence of the United States the Eighty-sixth.

Abraham Lincoln

By the President:

William H. Seward,

Secretary of State.